Enhancing Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea

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Introduction

There is growing awareness that the vast resources and potential in the Gulf of Guinea are being undermined by multifaceted domestic, regional and international threats and vulnerabilities. Rather than contributing to stability and economic prosperity for countries in this sub-region, pervasive insecurity in this resource-laden maritime environment has resulted in more than $2 billion in annual financial losses, significantly constrained investment and economic prospects, growing crime and potentially adverse political consequences. Historically, the concept of security has had two broad characteristics in many African countries. First, security has been associated with the perpetuation of a regime and not necessarily the welfare of a country and its inhabitants. Secondly, the focus has been primarily land-centric, because regime security has seldom had a maritime dimension. Consequently, maritime security arrangements in the Gulf of Guinea are under-resourced and have received scant policy attention.

A number of recent national and regional initiatives suggest a paradigm shift, as African countries, commercial entities, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders increasingly recognize the wide-ranging benefits of enhanced maritime security. This article provides an overview of maritime security threats in the Gulf of Guinea and evaluates the efficacy of recent efforts to address them. The article concludes by briefly examining key national and global implications of improved maritime security in this sub-region.

Threats and Vulnerabilities in the Gulf of Guinea's Maritime Domain

For the purpose of this article, the Gulf of Guinea is defined as the 11 coastal countries along the West and Central African countries that lie between Ghana and Angola (see Figure 1). This sub-region has a coastline of some 5,500 kilometers, roughly the size of the Gulf of Mexico. The maritime domain may be described as "all areas and things of, on, under, relating to, adjacent to, or bordering on a sea, ocean, or other navigable waterway, including all maritime related activities, infrastructure, people, cargo, and vessels and other conveyances."[1] In terms of geographical scope, the maritime domain could be defined as (a) territorial waters, 12 nautical miles from the coast; (b) contiguous zone or coastal waters, 24 nautical miles from the coast; and (c) the exclusive economic zone or EEZ, 200 nautical miles from the coast.[2] Exerting effective and sustained governance over this vast maritime domain is the daunting task facing countries in this

sub-region. Maritime security relates to prevention of unlawful acts in the maritime domain, whether they directly impact the country or region in question, or the perpetrators are in transit. Some of the main threats and vulnerabilities in the Gulf of Guinea are discussed below.

**Figure 1: Map of the Gulf of Guinea**
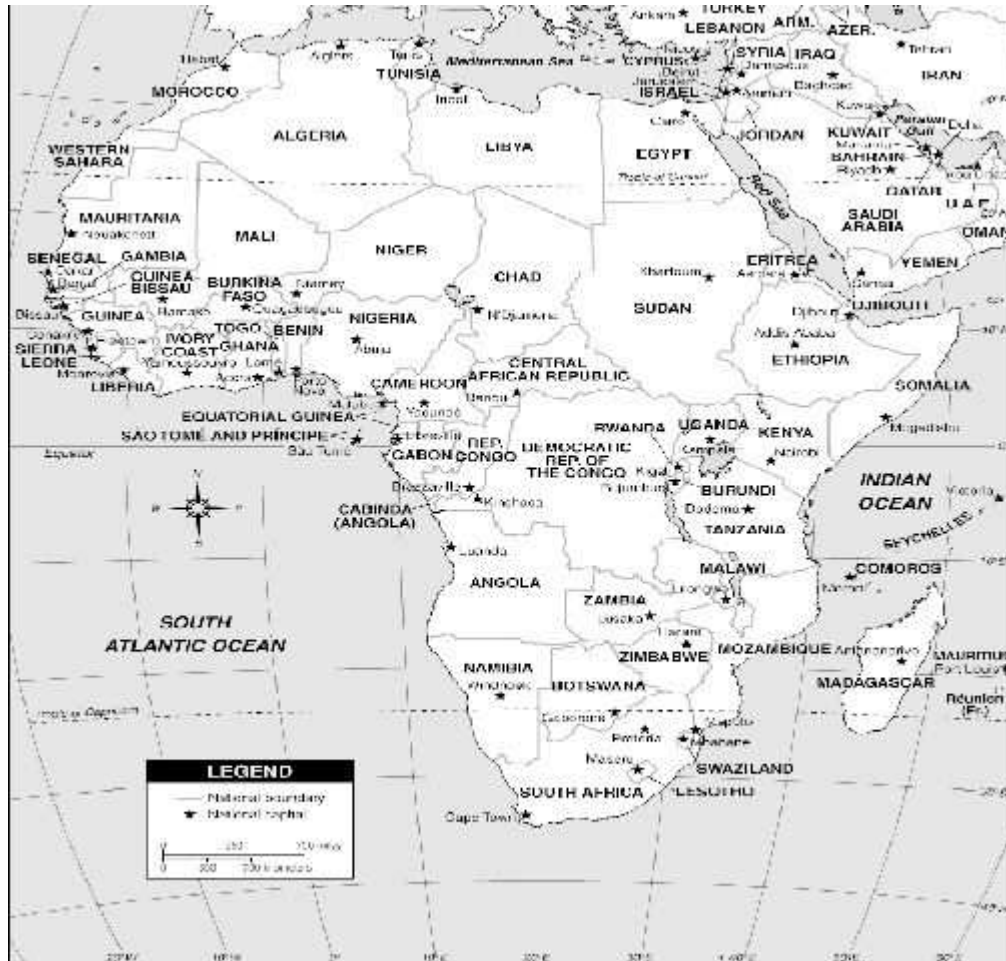
Threats

Poaching. An inability to exercise control over their maritime domain has made it difficult for Gulf of Guinea states to enjoy the full benefits of the significant fisheries resources in their EEZ. Recent studies suggest that poaching by vessels from Asia, Europe and other parts of Africa costs the sub-region some $370 million annually.[3] In addition to the financial losses, poaching also has human security costs. Households and individuals are affected directly via reduced availability of seafood in local markets. Data from the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) indicates that fish accounts for most of the protein intake in most countries—in Ghana it is 63%, Equatorial Guinea (62%) and Sao Tome and Principe (62%). Poaching also has a number of indirect effects, including the drastic reduction of incomes and loss of means of livelihood in fishing communities.

Piracy. The International Maritime Bureau ranks the Gulf of Guinea as one of the most troubled global waterways. Since the late 1990s, this sub-region consistently ranked among the top piracy hot spots worldwide. Between 2002 and 2004, piracy attacks in this sub-region exceeded

recorded incidents in the rest of the continent (see Figure Two). While there is some debate about definitional issues (including the inclusion of certain categories of petty theft) and data reliability, there is broad consensus that criminal activity in this part of the continent is worrisome. The charts illustrate that unlike most other parts of the continent, the vast majority of these attacks resulted in an actual boarding. This reflects a heightened level of maritime insecurity.

Figure 2: Piracy Attacks in Africa
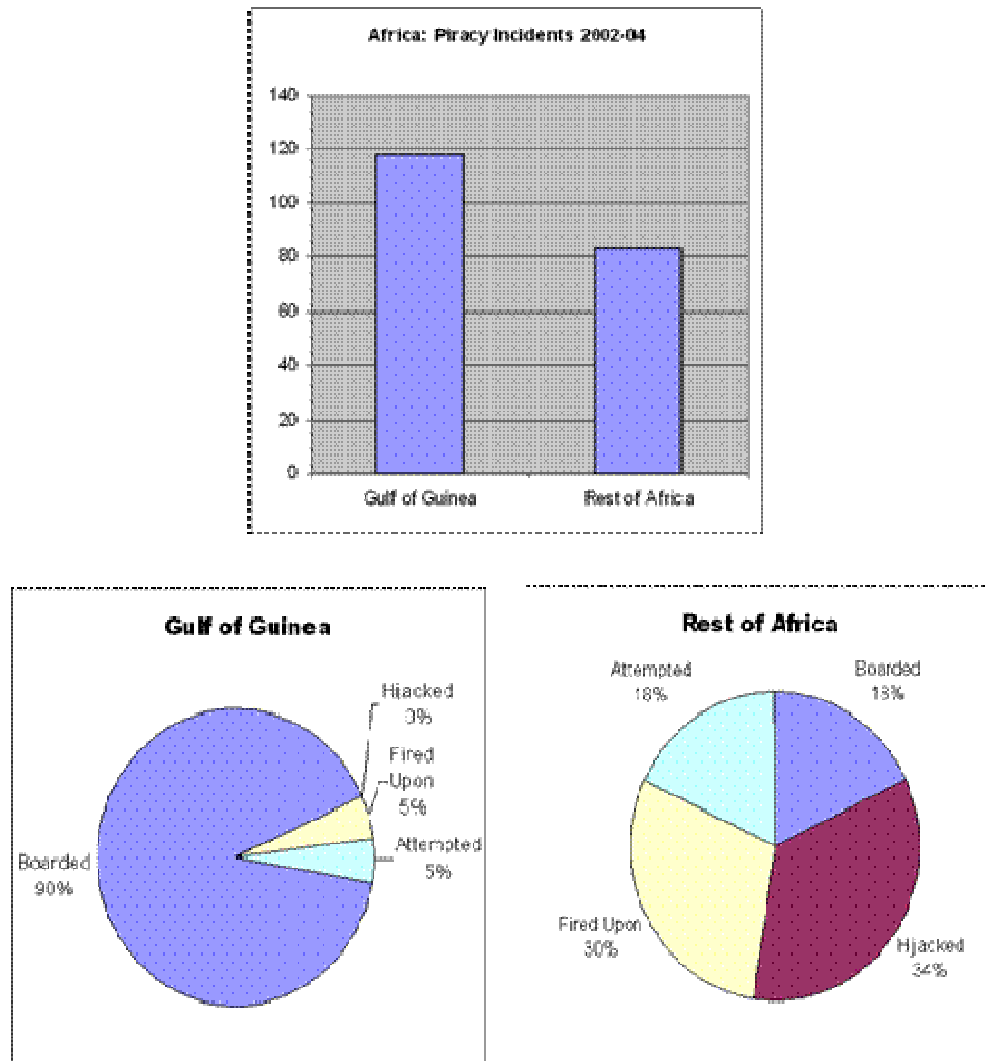
Source: International Maritime Bureau statistics.

National and trans-national crime. Growing crime complicates the tenuous security climate in this sub-region's maritime domain. Poor maritime governance significantly facilitates oil theft (also referred to as "illegal bunkering" in some literature) in the Niger Delta region, with dire regional ramifications. This highly organized activity costs the sub-region around $1.2 billion every year in lost revenue.[4] In addition, the criminal gangs responsible for oil theft contribute to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region. Recent evidence suggests that the weaponry is becoming more sophisticated and lethal as the criminal gangs seek to evade national law enforcement personnel.[5]

Another criminal trend worth noting is the transshipment of narcotics. The Gulf of Guinea is becoming a major narco-trafficking hub. A significant amount of high-grade cocaine seized in what Spanish authorities have dubbed "the new drug triangle between Cape Verde, the Canary Islands and Madeira"[6] was routed via the Gulf of Guinea, in vessels manned by crews from the sub-region.

Disputed Boundaries. Enduring disagreements over maritime boundaries could precipitate armed conflict, particularly when the disputed areas have significant economic potential or are strategic transportation hubs.

These disputes also make it much more difficult for countries in the sub-region to address shared security challenges in a collaborative manner. Examples of maritime disputes in the Gulf of Guinea include those between: Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula; Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon over an island at the mouth of the Ntem River; and Gabon and Equatorial Guinea over the Mbane Island and Corisco Bay boundaries.

Environmental degradation. Pollution and environmental degradation are relatively unchecked in the Gulf of Guinea. The 2005 Abuja Declaration[7] reiterates issues highlighted in analysis by the Food and Agricultural Organization,[8] which indicates that a mismanagement of fisheries resources in the sub-region has led to stock depletion, distorted ecological balance and environmental degradation. Less than 25 percent of the countries in this sub-region have ratified the 1990 Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation.[9] The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA)—the oil industry's focal point for communication—are working with African governments to encourage the ratification and implementation of relevant conventions. Their objectives in the Gulf of Guinea are articulated in the Convention for Co-operation in the Protection and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the West and Central African Region (WACAF or Abidjan Convention).[10] Although the petroleum industry has been singled out as a major polluter in a lot of literature, improper domestic and industrial waste disposal also poses a significant threat.

Vulnerabilities

Maritime domain awareness. As mentioned earlier, the traditional land-centric approach to security in the sub-region contributed to a systemic neglect of maritime forces in both absolute and relative terms. It is, therefore, not surprising that countries in the sub-region are unaware of most traffic and activities in their territorial waters. Basic equipment (such as functioning surveillance systems), materiel (including patrol craft) and trained personnel are in short supply. According to data published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, patrol boats are deficient in the sub-region, with most listed assets categorized as "unseaworthy" in Angola, Benin, Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[11] Poor maritime domain awareness undermines security by making it possible for criminals to operate with impunity—thereby jeopardizing safety.

Legislative and judicial arrangements. While countries in this sub-region are signatories to most relevant international conventions,[12] very few have taken concrete measures to ratify and institutionalize these protocols domestically.[13] Creating and enforcing the necessary provisions would require sustained political will, the enactment of enabling legislation, the strengthening of relevant institutions and enforcement mechanisms, and devoting adequate financial and human resources to maritime security. This vulnerability is highlighted in local media reports about poachers apprehended in the sub-region, who often have to be released after paying only minimal fines because the country in question did not have the right laws on their books. However, even when appropriate laws exist (as they do in most countries), the ability to effectively prosecute depends on the strength and independence of the judiciary. In most cases a

combination of corruption, inefficiency and capacity constraints compromise the effectiveness of the judicial system.

Weak infrastructure. Most port and surveillance infrastructure is in need of repair, upgrading or replacement. Failure to pay sufficient attention to this crucial aspect of maritime security over the years is partly responsible for the current state of affairs. According to IMO progress reports, countries in this sub-region are yet to fully comply with standards for port safety and security outlined in the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, to which all countries are signatories. In addition, an estimated 85 percent of vessels registered in Gulf of Guinea states are more than 20 years old, making them more susceptible to accidents—the global average for vessels more than 20 years old is only 15 percent.[14]

Some Human Security Implications[15]

The threats and vulnerabilities outlined above have had wide-ranging effects on human security in the Gulf of Guinea, some of which have already been discussed. Together, they undermine economic activity, hinder the movement of goods and services, and make it difficult for these countries to attain their development goals. By affecting these areas, maritime security problems compound the sub-region's human security challenges. Therefore, understanding the implications of continued maritime insecurity (in all its forms) makes a strong case for urgent, comprehensive and collaborative reform.

Economic Losses. Poaching undermines the local fishing industry, crime is a disincentive to commerce because it increases the cost of doing business, and pollution undermines tourism by degrading the beach and marine environments. The fiscal impact of these losses is felt via lost landing fees, licensing fees, taxes, and levies; as well as via the onerous spending required to respond to security incidents. The quantum of annual losses exceeds debt service requirements on multilateral loans in the sub-region. This suggests that efforts to reduce these losses could enhance government revenue, thereby facilitating more investment in health, education and poverty reduction. Potential additional revenue could also be used to fund maritime security initiatives; the Ghanaian government has adopted this approach to partially finance a "home grown" national maritime security strategy (with support from U.S. Naval Forces Europe).

At a micro level, constrained economic activity limits employment opportunities, as well as the income earning potential, of coastal populations. Unemployment and low wages exacerbate human security concerns in the sub-region. Perhaps the most significant losses result from lost investment. Although some researchers estimate some $10 billion worth of investment in the Gulf of Guinea's petroleum sector from 2005-2015,[16] continued instability in Nigeria's Delta Region could force investors to reconsider their decisions.[17] Maritime instability is one reason many investors and entrepreneurs have shown relatively little interest in the sub-region's potentially lucrative fishing and tourism industries.

Trade and Shipping. The safety/security of shipping routes and facilities is also important because an overwhelming proportion of trade in the sub-region traverses the maritime domain. Insecure and inadequate facilities constrain activity and raise both transportation costs and insurance premiums. Trading partners (principally in Europe) have expressed some concern. For example, the failure of most cocoa exporting countries in the Gulf of Guinea to comply with the European Cocoa Association's June 2004 directive on port security resulted in higher insurance costs for operators in those countries. Some countries are already taking steps to address this issue. The government of Benin signed a Millennium Challenge Compact with the United States in 2006, which in part included improvements to the port of Cotonou. This project prioritized measures to improve port safety and security as a means to promote economic growth and improve human security.

Millennium Development Goals. In the late 1990s developing countries agreed on a set of eight broad objectives, and associated benchmarks, to reduce poverty and enhance human security.[18] Challenges in the maritime domain make it more difficult for countries in the Gulf of Guinea to attain these goals. Figure 3 illustrates this point by highlighting some relationships between improved maritime security and positive developments in the fisheries sector.[19]

Figure 3: A Sample of Millennium Development Goals

Fisheries and Some Millennium Development Goals in Africa

Goal 1	Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	⇨ Income-earning opportunities to 10 million households. ⇨ Enhanced food security for 200 million.
Goal 3	Promote gender equity	⇨ Women account for 50% of fisheries sector; dominant in trade.
Goal 4	Reduce infant mortality	⇨ Fish provides vital nutrients: protein and minerals.
Goal 7	Ensure environmental sustainability	⇨ Improvements in fisheries practices would benefit marine environment.
Goal 8	Develop global partnerships for development	⇨ Fish trade could improve trade balance; earnings could help reduce dependence on aid.

Source: WorldFish Center 2006

Growing Interest in the Gulf of Guinea

The immense potential of the Gulf of Guinea (both in terms of its resource endowment and strategic importance as a shipping route/hub) has drawn domestic and international attention to the urgent need for focused action to address existing and potential challenges. Given the multifaceted nature of pervasive threats, any successful strategy would have to be inter-sectoral, and involve a broad spectrum of domestic and international stakeholders. Recent efforts by regional and international actors to consider appropriate and sustainable approaches to enhance maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea are listed in Figure 4, below.

Figure 4: Recent Meetings on Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea

- November 2006 (Cotonou, Benin). Ministerial conference on maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea, organized by U.S. European Command, U.S. Naval Forces in Europe, U.S. State Department and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Further to recommendations from a March 2006 workshop (see below), this conference aimed to secure political commitments to implement comprehensive and effective national and regional strategies. The communiqué and Plan of Action adopted by the ministers discussed (a) the importance of taking practical steps to improve surveillance and information sharing, (b) the need for robust and appropriate laws and regulatory regimes, (c) the value of enhanced regional cooperation and policy harmonization, (d) the facilitating role of increased public awareness of the scope and effects of maritime insecurity, (e) the supportive role of bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental and commercial partners, and (f) the necessity of unwavering political will by leaders in the

sub-region.

- October 2006 (Dakar, Senegal). The 13th annual assembly of the International Maritime Organization/Maritime Organisation for West and Central African States.[20] The recommendations included (a) the need to establish an integrated coastguard function network of the west and central coast of Africa, (b) the importance of harmonizing legislation, practices and procedures, which together provide the security necessary for the safe and secure operation of port facilities and ships at all security levels, (c) the value of instituting national mechanisms for intra and intergovernmental agencies and other relevant stakeholders cooperation and coordination, and (d) the importance of appropriate national maritime security policies to safeguard maritime trade from all forms of unlawful acts.

- August 2006 (Libreville, Gabon). Heads of State meeting of the Gulf of Guinea Commission.[21] Leaders of eight West and Central African countries convened a meeting to formally launch the organization and reiterate their continued sub-regional commitment to conflict resolution, socio-economic prosperity, environmental protection and maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. A subsequent November 2006 meeting of heads of state did not materialize.

- May/June 2006 (Abuja, Nigeria). Second Africa Sea Power Symposium. Heads of African navies met to discuss modalities to enhance professionalism, improve focus and increase collaboration. They agreed on the need to (a) enhance maritime domain awareness by adopting appropriate technology like automated identification systems, (b) set up a permanent structure at continental level to manage maritime related issues, (c) improve public awareness, and (d) take steps to adopt and implement international conventions.

- March, 2006 (Accra, Ghana). U.S. European Command, U.S. Naval Forces in Europe, and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies organized an experts' workshop on maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea. This workshop (a) analyzed the broad range of maritime safety and security threats facing countries in the Gulf of Guinea; (b) identified the multifaceted implications of continued instability in this region's territorial waters; (c) evaluated the roles of domestic, regional and non-regional entities in exacerbating or abating maritime threats and vulnerabilities; (d) outlined the key elements of a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable strategy for effective maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea; and (e) highlighted practical steps that Gulf of Guinea states could take to individually and collectively to adopt and successfully implement such a strategy over time.

- August 2005. The NEPAD declaration on sustainable fisheries in Africa was signed in Abuja, Nigeria. This initiative alludes to the importance of bolstering security and regional collaboration.

- July 2005. The World Conservation Union expressed support for a sub-regional initiative to protect the maritime environment by delineating and eventually enforcing maritime protected areas in Africa, including the Gulf of Guinea.

- June 2005. The creation of the Strategic Partnership for Fisheries in Africa; supported by the World Bank, African Union, World Wildlife Fund, and Food and Agricultural Organization. The Global Environment Fund committed a $60 million grant to support related activities.

Since January 2004, there have been close to twenty international events focusing on various aspects of maritime security in Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. Although this trend has greatly contributed to a fuller appreciation of the nature, scope and implications of these issues (domestically, regionally and globally), much more needs to be done to translate good intentions into coherent, targeted and tangible strategies. Coordinating the outcomes of the various events and initiatives remains a serious challenge. For example, programs to provide equipment and training to improve maritime domain awareness should be complemented by efforts to improve arrest capabilities. Being better aware of activity in the maritime domain is of little value if steps could not be taken to successfully arrest wrongdoers. By the same token, measures to ratify international conventions and promulgate relevant domestic legislation should be accompanied by judicial reform. Good laws require a robust, capable and independent judiciary.

The United States has played an important role in the Gulf of Guinea not only by hosting meetings for experts and decision-makers to consider and develop appropriate strategies, but also by providing technical and material support. The U.S. National Strategy for Maritime Security (September 2005) highlights the importance of integrating efforts to address all threats to maritime security. It underscores the United States' commitment to assisting African countries to promote maritime sovereignty by helping them improve monitoring, establish responsive decision-making arrangements, enhance interdiction capacity, develop effective policing protocols and promote regional coordination.[22] Furthermore, the U.S. International Outreach and Coordination Strategy for the National Strategy for Maritime Security emphasizes the importance of "enhanced outreach to foreign governments, international and regional organizations, private sector partners and the public to solicit support for improved global maritime security."[23] In December 2006, the Bush Administration unveiled the African Maritime Governance Initiative, which is a multi-agency approach to enhanced maritime governance. This initiative will help African countries improve maritime domain awareness and prevent exploitation/misuse of resources, and improve law enforcement efforts, secure facilities and sea lanes.

Developing a Strategic Approach for Enhanced Maritime Governance

A strategic approach for the Gulf of Guinea requires consistency between domestic and partner-initiated programs, as well as significant regional collaboration given the trans-national character of most threats and vulnerabilities. Thus, an effective strategy must incorporate national, regional and global realities. While the precise configuration would largely be country-specific, effective strategies would broadly adhere to a four-fold framework encompassing: demonstrable political commitment, increased operational efficiency, transparent regulatory systems, and heightened public awareness.

1. Demonstrable Political Commitment

Strong political will and national ownership are a vital part of an effective strategy. Leaders and citizens must demonstrate an unwavering commitment to address corruption and implement comprehensive strategies. An unwavering political will (which is central to any successful strategy) is currently lacking because (a) vestiges of a land-centric approach still persist, (b) some authorities are complicit, and (c) other authorities are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. Given the trans-national character of maritime security threats, this political will must also be expressed regionally. In this vein, countries in the sub-region must be willing to cede sovereignty concerns to advance regional solutions in this regard.

The success of political and policy pronouncements is contingent upon long-term engagement and an inclusive and participatory political process. Gulf of Guinea states have already taken tangible steps to elevate maritime security issues. The November 2006 communiqué adopted at the Maritime Safety and Security Ministerial Conference in Benin clearly articulates sub-regional commitment to demonstrate sustained political will. National governments are also making

progress. The government of Gabon has identified a focal ministry to coordinate maritime security programs and established a Maritime Safety Committee to bolster inter-agency collaboration. The Nigerian government established the Presidential Implementation Committee for Maritime Safety and Security (PICOMSS) in 2005, reporting directly to the head of state, as a demonstration of its renewed commitment to improved maritime security.

2. Increased Operational Efficiency

Countries need to take immediate steps to detect, apprehend and prosecute wrongdoers. This requires the acquisition of appropriate equipment, technology and trained human resources, including obtaining appropriate and adequate AIS systems and surveillance infrastructure. Countries also need to develop processes and policies that would enhance inter-agency coordination and domestic/sub-regional information sharing and analysis.

Capacity building is necessary to recruit and retain required personnel. Gulf of Guinea countries have benefited from multilateral and bilateral initiatives in this regard. In 2005, the International Maritime Organization conducted two national (Gabon and Nigeria) and one sub-regional (held in Ghana) "train the trainers" workshops on maritime security. The U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Naval Forces in Europe have also been very instrumental in supporting capacity building initiatives across the sub-region.

Several of the Gulf of Guinea countries are taking steps in the right direction. Benin's market access project, part of its MCA program, aims to improve operational efficiency by upgrading surveillance and communication facilities and strengthening institutional reforms. Angola's National Maritime Surveillance System plans to install new radar systems, adopt appropriate AIS technology, and introduce sea patrol vessels and aircraft in order to improve its ability to effectively monitor its maritime environment. The government also plans to establish a network of data collection and processing centers to expedite and facilitate relevant information flows.

At the sub-regional level, Gulf of Guinea countries are committed to collaborative action via the MOWCA initiative. Objectives agreed upon during the July 2006 IMO/MOWCA meeting include the establishment of (a) an integrated sub-regional coast guard network, (b) a center for information and communication, (c) a transit facilitation and "sealed grid" system, and (d) a regional maritime fund to support these efforts.

3. Transparent Regulatory Systems

Countries in the sub-region need to adopt and ratify of international conventions, which would provide a framework for a robust regulatory framework. Within this context, domestic legislative frameworks must be made more transparent and enforceable, while judicial systems should be reformed and judges more accountable.

In addition to taking steps to ratify and implement all relevant international conventions, however, Gulf of Guinea states are also reviewing domestic legislation. Harmonizing sub-regional laws would facilitate policy implementation—for example, the ability of sub-regional states to collaborate on issues like "hot pursuit." Gabon updated its Merchant Marine Code (January 1963) in December 1994, and introduced specific laws to secure its fishing industry (Law No. 15/2005) in 2005. Other countries (like Ghana) are recognizing that existing laws and regulations may only have limited utility. According to senior Ghanaian officials, existing fisheries laws only affect the country's two industrial ports in Tema and Takoradi, while 334 smaller landing sites (catering to an estimated 13,000 smaller vessels) are relatively ignored. Efforts are currently underway to make the legislative framework more comprehensive in scope and implementation.

4. Heightened Public Awareness

Finally, sensitizing leaders and general public about the potential maritime security benefits makes it easier to build national/regional ownership for investments in maritime security. Understanding the implications of continued threats also helps domestic and sub-regional actors better understand their respective roles. The Plan of Action adopted at the 2006 ministerial conference in Benin commits Gulf of Guinea states to develop national and sub-regional strategies for increasing public awareness about maritime safety and security, and establish an interactive database and dedicated website to educate and sensitize the general public about the opportunities and challenges in the maritime domain.

Conclusion

As evidenced by their active participation and policy commitments at various regional programs, countries in the Gulf of Guinea recognize the importance of maritime security in the sub-region. Many governments are taking steps to formulate and implement national and regional strategies to address the growing challenges they face. Gulf of Guinea leaders need to move from good intentions to tangible results. It is also clear that no single country will be successful on its own. The benefits of the region's abundantly endowed maritime domain could be derived through a firm commitment to collective action. A shared investment in maritime security (which is a "public good") would have far-reaching human security benefits, and positive global implications.

Regional organizations (like MOWCA), international agencies (like the IMO), commercial entities (like petroleum and fishing companies) and bilateral partners (like the United States) could play a crucial role, but their efforts would have limited utility if they are not well coordinated and consistent with the needs of the sub-region. Luckily, both the governments and citizens of Gulf of Guinea states are much better sensitized about the opportunities and vulnerabilities in their maritime domain than in the past, and their expressed commitment to joint action to combat shared threats, with assistance from a broad range of partners, bodes well for the future.

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